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ABSTRACT

Though many would like to see a de-emphasis on grades in American higher education, three major reasons prevent this: student motivation, student perception, and the nature of American society. Students need extrinsic motivation and grades are the most effective of all student motivational tools. In addition, as evaluation is always oriented toward goals, grades act as goals for students. Students perceive grades as a reward for diligence. This reflects American society's promotion of competition in all aspects of life. Parents also place high value on grades. In addition, students are prone to judge each other and themselves on the basis of grades. Many employers use grades to evaluate and select students for jobs. Even driver insurance policies often have deductions for students with high grade point averages. Competition and reward is America. It is clear that America is an individualistic society where competition is encouraged. A society's educational system is most effective when it complements social perspectives. Educational institutions that wish to prepare students for success must consider social attitudes and philosophies. Consequently, instead of finding ways to de-emphasize grades, teachers should find ways to improve grading methods. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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Let Grades Be Emphasized

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Instructors often think that the emphasis on grades is detrimental to the American education system. The emphasis that is placed on grades is essential if instructors are to be successful. Three major reasons prevent deemphasis of university grading: student motivation, student perception, and the nature of American society.

The emphasis on grades at universities is necessary. Emphasizing grades has become an integral part of the American academic system. If grades were deemphasized, students interest in subjects would deteriorate. While it is nice to theorize academic utopia, it is better to realistically approach the questions of academia. In their book, Educational Measurement Lindeman and Merenda state, "In the absence of utopia one must deal with the situation as it exists. The A, B, C, D, and E grading system, or a variation of it, is here and will probably remain for much time to come" (1979, p. 199). Three major reasons prevent deemphasis of university grading: student motivation, student perception, and the nature of American society. If educators deemphasize grades students will be confused by multiple contradictions.

What a joy it would be if students required no external motivation. In the perfect learning environment all students would attend every class, never be distracted, fulfill requirements, interact with class discussion, and desire mastery of subject matter. In such an environment instructors would never have to take roll, never be dissatisfied with classroom participation or performance, and not consider grades. But students do need extrinsic motivation and grades are the most effective of all student motivational tools (McKeachie, 1986, p. 225).

Students' motivation is essential for academic excellence. Why do students study? The ideal answer to this question would include the quest for knowledge and the betterment of self. A more realistic response would include grades. Grades are academic carrots dangled before students. Without an emphasis on grades many students would quickly lose interest. Wilber McKeachie calls grades, "The most important motivational device" (1986, p. 225). Evaluation is always oriented toward goals (Ahmann, 1962, p. 10). Grades are the goals that students set and taking away

these goals would be highly detrimental to American Education.

McKeachie states, "Because grades are so important to them, many students will learn whatever is necessary to get the grades they desire. If instructors base grades on memorization of details, students will memorize the text. If they believe grades are based upon their ability to integrate and apply principles, they'll attempt to do this" (p. 225). Instead of fighting this well established motivational force perhaps instructors should employ grades as academic carrots.

Some business people work for their corporations only to promote that corporation, to help out. The majority of employees, however, would list financial reward as a primary reason for employment. Many corporations stress income and this emphasis serves as a motivational force. This type of attitude is similar to students' approaches to classes. Some students study to learn and grow. The majority of students, however, would list grades as a motivation for study. If the motivation for employment or education is deemphasized the quality of work or study will deteriorate. Grades are a spur to classroom performance (National Education Association, 1974, p. 16).

It is clear that students value grades. No reward seems to better motivate students. One of the reasons grades are such effective motivators is the students' perception of grades. Grades represent more than letters and numbers to students. Grades are stressed to students in many ways.

Students perceive grades as a reward for diligence. American society has promoted the idea of competition not only in academics but in all aspects of life. Education is not soley responsible for students' perceptions of grades. Grades are emphasized in almost all parts of society. Parents, peers, employers, and many other

outside forces contribute to students' perceptions of grades.

Many parents punish children for low grades and reward them for acceptable grades. Some parents financially reward students for higher grades. Imagine the internal struggle younger students could experience if instructors strongly deemphasize grades while parents emphasized them. Many parents are, perhaps, the most enthusiastic of all those who emphasize grades. As students leave the house and move on to university the parental pressure often continues. We all remember those days when grade cards were issued and we questioned how our parents would respond. Parents are not the only reinforcers of the importance of grades.

Students are prone to judge each other, and themselves. Students' GPAs are one of the criteria by which peers judge each other. Becker, Geer, and Hughes point out "Grades are likely to be used as a basis of judgment of the personal worth of other students and oneself" (1986, p. 116). Grades are viewed as a sign of personal achievement, maturity, intelligence, and discipline. Students constantly ask each other questions like; "What did you get?", "What's your GPA?", "How did you do this semester?" These questions reinforce the emphasis placed on grades. Students also know grades will determine future employment opportunities.

The University of North Texas recently observed that only B-plus-and-up students seem in demand by employers ("Labor Letter," 1990). Dale Stein, Joseph Galetto, and Herd Harmison are all college officials who have also observed the emphasis on grades by American corporate recruiters. They see an emphasis by recruiters on grade-point averages as a basis for granting interviews and extending job offers. If professors attempted to deemphasize grade-point averages they would be strongly contradicted by employers. It is difficult to maintain that students do not

concentrate on results when their future depends on these results. It should be made clear to students that grades are one of the primary, if not the primary, criteria by which they will be judged by future employers (Hults, Gardner, Kozlowski, 1988, p. 26).

Many other outside forces contribute to students' perceptions of grades. A good example would be insurance companies. Automobile insurance policies generally have a deduction for students with a 3.0 or higher GPA. This deduction reinforces the emphasis placed on grades. These reinforcements come from outside the academic institutions, but the institutions also contribute to students' perceptions of grades.

If high school athletes wish to participate in sports they must maintain a specific grade average. This philosophy is employed by most universities. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (N.C.A.A.) requires a minimum GPA in core classes and a minimum S.A.T. or A.C.T. scores, as do most college athletic governing associations. Athletics are not alone in requiring certain grade averages. Most students who wish to participate in band, student government, fraternities and sororities, debate, or other extra-curricular activities must also meet academic standards. Many institutions place students on "probation" if they fail to achieve a specific GPA. How can grades be deemphasized by professors and simultaneously emphasized by coaches or other group leaders? Deemphasis of grades, at any level, would be a contradiction.

It is unrealistic to deemphasize grades. Emphasizing grades in college is similar to emphasiing income in America. Some would like to see income deemphasized in American society, but America has grown accustomed to this measuring stick, and it has proven to be a motivational force. Even though some would like to see grades deemphasized, this appears unrealistic. Academia has

developed an approach to grades that mirrors American society's attitude toward income. Students' ideas concerning grades are formulated well before reaching university level. Twelve or thirteen years of schooling have reinforced the emphasis on grades.

Most colleges and universities consider high school grades when admitting students. To gain acceptance to a university, students must receive goodgrades. Once students are accepted, most universities continue to emphasize grades. To be accepted into specific academic programs within the university, more GPA standards are often required. Academic honors associations, scholarships, and other rewards such as "dean's lists" also reinforce the importance of grades. Often professors attempt to deemphasize grades but with these conflicting messages it is no wonder they cannot convince students of how unimportant letter grades are. Instead of deemphasizing evaluation perhaps it would be more effective to stress the importance of grades.

In recent years many authors have presented the emphasis of grades as negative. If indeed this practice is "evil" perhaps instructors should consider this emphasis a "necessary evil". If professors do not motivate students through a reward system they will find it difficult to motivate them at all. If change is desirable, teachers cannot take responsibility for this change. Students' attitudes and perceptions originate far beyond the school houses and lecture halls of America.

Competition and reward is America. American society is built on a grading system of its own. It is clear that we live in an individualistic, as opposed to collective, society and that competition is encouraged through such a society (Jablin, Putnam, Roberts, Porter, 1987). A society's educational system is most effective when

complementing social perspectives. If educational institutions wish to better prepare students they should consider social attitudes and philosophies.

It would be difficult to contradict Alfie Kohn's opening words in his book, No Contest: "Life for us has become an endless succession of contests. From the moment the alarm clock rings until sleep overtakes us again, from the time we are toddlers until the day we die, we are busy struggling to outdo others. This is our posture at work and at school, on the playing field and back home. It is the common denominator of American life" (1986, p. 2). Indeed competition is strongly interwoven into the fiber of American life. Kohn later rebukes this philosophy, but his opening point seems to present one of the strongest reasons for encouraging competition and evaluation in education.

American society requires evaluation. From sports to business, Americans desire evaluation. Some recreation leagues have taken the point evaluation system out of athletics. Imagine adopting this approach for high-school, college, and professional athletics. If every athletic event ended in a draw athletes and spectators would soon lose interest, desire, and motivation. Emphasis on point evaluation in athletics creates competition, raises the standard of play, and heightens interest. In education there should not be specific "winners" or "losers," but each student should set individual goals. If grades are deemphasized these goals fade.

The National Education Association advocates the practice of testing and assessment. In a 1984 release the National Education Association presented their viewpoint on testing and assessment. "Testing and assessment must be part of the educational process since good teaching is based in some degree on the results of tests. Through the teacher's daily assessment of performance, behavior, seatwork,

boardwork, homework, and class discussion, students get needed feedback on how well they are learning" (NEA, 1983 p. 1).

Instead of finding ways to deemphasize grades perhaps professors should find ways to improve grading methods. Many authors have devoted writings to this subject (Cangelosi, 1982; Elkstrom, 1983; Gottman, 1972; Schrader; 1979.) Grades are here to stay. Instructors should take advantage of this system of evaluation to accomplish course objectives. It is obvious that students hold highly the importance of grades. Why not use this attitude for educational purposes? With pressure from peers, parents, employers, society, academic institutions, and other outside forces it appears highly unlikely teachers can alter students' perceptions of grades.

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